

ZOE Kenya 2017

I have just returned from Kenya, visiting ZOE's orphan empowerment groups there. Although the Amani Athi Group that FUMC partnered with has graduated, there were still many groups for our team of twelve to visit. Eight of our team were from Texas, one was from Portland, Oregon, and three of us were from North Carolina.

We first visited a graduate group and later met with graduates from other groups. These young people have started multiple businesses, some have completed high school and even gone on to college, paying their own way. Two of the young people we met with are completing their degrees in public administration and social work and want to work for a non-governmental organization (NGO) or the government helping people. Their energy and ambition are inspiring.

Those of us who had visited Kenya before noticed that the children are progressing through the program more quickly now. After only six months, young people have successful businesses established. Groups are starting their own micro loan operations, lending money on a short-term (one week to one month) basis with the interest going back into the fund and loaned out again quickly. In this way, the young people can expand their business, open a new operation, rent more land for farming or improve their housing.

One group we visited met on the property of a very successful young woman named Felister. She has a hair salon, she raises goats and chickens. After the group's training in health and hygiene, she built a very nice latrine, a handwashing station and received a water tank to store her clean water. Her chicken coop was well built. Her group considered her to be one of the top successes so far in its first year.

Another young woman in the group, Annrita, had worked as a laundress before joining ZOE. Her first business was a kiosk selling food. Then because she knew about motorbikes, she started selling parts. She learned how to repair motorbikes and opened a shop (her working group gave her a loan to buy the tools) and even has a place where "the bikes can have a sleepover" if needed. She has adopted a young boy of 13 whom she is training in motorbike repair. She is also teaching Felister how to ride a motorbike so she can start a taxi business. Remarkable examples of how these young people care for and support each other.

A very powerful experience for us happened on a visit to a third year group that our family had been helping to support. When we arrived, the team was invited to sit in the place of honor. They told us that many of their group had travelled a good distance and so they would like to share their breakfast with us. They served us boiled eggs from Bonface's chickens, bananas from Catherine and Justus's farms, and Kenyan milk tea with milk from Bonface's cow. The meal was made even more delicious knowing that two and a half years ago these children were eating only one meal a day, if that, of beans and maize. After the meeting, we toured Bonface's property. He showed us his barber shop/phone charging center, his cow and goats, his tilapia farm and sugar cane field. He also rents coffee and tea farms and sells the harvests. He has

saved his money and lends it to others at interest. He has built a house for himself and now supports his aunt and cousins.

One of the features of ZOE groups is the “merry go round” which is a savings fund established early on with the members. Each meeting every member family contributes a given amount, e.g. \$1. The money is then used to buy necessities for the families: utensils, plastic chairs, chickens to start their flock. One of the groups we visited meets in a local Methodist church. In gratitude, they bought the church a table and chairs. They even purchased a thermos flask for the pastor. They also assist the elderly in their community.

Interestingly, in this month before their presidential elections, the ZOE groups are talking about how they can work for peace in their communities. They are developing strategies for peaceful dialog in a country that has often seen violence around elections. This initiative has come from the young people themselves, rather than the ZOE staff, something that is happening more frequently in the program and indicates the level of empowerment these young people are achieving.

Although FUMC is not currently supporting a group in Kenya, these kinds of activities and achievements are typical of what is happening throughout the program in other countries. Every spring, ZOE’s staff from across the world meets together to share what is happening in their countries’ groups, what are new developments arising from the children’s experiences, and how the learnings can be applied in other parts of the program. Through this sharing, successful initiatives in one country can be tested in others to improve the model. In this way, the ZOE model is dynamic, with initiatives coming from the children as well as from the staff. With our financial support, they are going far beyond what we could envision for them.



Felister's handwashing station



Chicken coop



Water tank and dish drying rack



Annrita's shop



Motorbike repair tools



Pamela serving milk tea



Team enjoying breakfast



Bonface's talapia pond and sugar cane



Bonface in his barber shop